

Work, specimen, witness: How different perspectives on museum objects alter the way they are perceived and the values attributed to them¹

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Abstract

The generic term 'museum objects' suggests that a uniform category is involved. But museums in various disciplines have exhibited objects according to quite different rules and have assigned values to them that depend on the standards of the field of inquiry concerned: aesthetic quality, value as a historical source, as a relic or as a representative item. Over time, various display conventions have become established, which appear to us today to be natural and that assign the objects to specific stimulus values. The aim of this essay is to achieve a better understanding of these exhibition practices and discipline-specific value standards. The study aims to discover why we have become accustomed to using objects in exhibitions in different ways, and it distinguishes between three types of object: *work*, *specimen* and *witness*. The hypothesis here is that each of these follows its own display conventions, forms of perception and standards of value. The present essay aims to situate these three types of object – work, specimen and witness – historically and in this way to articulate the differences in status that exist between them.

Key words: museum, object, specimen, work, witness

The origin of the museum lies in a desire to obtain knowledge through contact with objects. During the Renaissance, the precursor or prototype for today's museums developed: the cabinets of arts and curiosities, with their colourful mixtures of objects from nature, from the arts and sciences, and from antiquity. The rooms were intended to bring together the entire universe in all the abundance of its phenomena within a small space, reflecting the macrocosm in a microcosm (cf. MacGregor 2007). The specialization of the sciences that took place during the Enlightenment put an end to this pre-rational juxtaposition and led to the objects being separated: arts, weapons, instruments, natural objects and relics of historical events were no longer placed in the same rooms, but were distributed to art museums, arsenals, and to museums of natural history and history.

Each of these classes of museum disciplined the objects in its own way: they exhibited them in accordance with specific rules and assigned a value (cf. Frow 1995) to them that depended on the standards of the discipline concerned: aesthetic quality, value as a historical source, as a relic, or as a representative item. In short, value describes those features that make the object appear museum-worthy in the eyes of art scholars, biologists, archaeologists, or historians (to name but a few). Depending on the type of museum concerned, various ideas developed about which objects were museum-worthy for what reasons, and about the way in which they should be exhibited. Over time, various display conventions became established that appear to us today to be natural, so to speak, and which assign the objects to specific stimulus values in our perception.

The aim of this essay is to achieve a better understanding of these *exhibition practices* and *discipline-specific value standards*. Its purpose is to find out why we have become accustomed to displaying objects in various ways in exhibitions, and it distinguishes between three types of object: *work*, *specimen*, and *witness*.² The hypothesis here is that each of these follows its own display conventions, forms of perception and standards of value. In the fields of art studies and literary studies, these are based on *aesthetic theory*; in the natural sciences, they

are based on *taxonomies*; and in the field of general history, they are based on the concept of *source*. The present essay aims to situate these three types of object – work, specimen and witness – historically and in this way to articulate the differences in status that exist between them. In the process, it also inquires into the extent to which originality (and, closely related to that, authenticity³) – regarded as implying ‘a work composed firsthand’⁴ – is relevant to the value of each group of objects (cf. Sofka 1985; Schärer 1994).

The essay – which is mainly based on examples in Germany – is divided into the three types of object: work, specimen and witness. Each section starts with a recent example case in order to present the display characteristics for each group of objects. The argument is then given a basis in the research literature and an attempt is made, using a few example theories and historical examples, to understand why specific usages, display conventions and value attributions were able to arise; this ultimately allows more precise definition of the three types of object. The core of the argument lies in showing that the status of work, specimen and witness is not assigned to objects in any quasi-natural sense, but is the *result of curatorial practice*. Objects are not in themselves work, specimen, or witness; it is we who *make* them into these.

Work

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (*La Gioconda*, 1502/03) hangs in Room 6 of the Denon Wing of the Louvre. It is in a solitary position on a large monochrome wall, behind reinforced glass, and has three museum guards assigned to it. A wooden balustrade and black cordons hold off the mass of visitors who crowd round the museum's most famous work every day, diligently photographing it and barely noticing the other 50 or so other paintings that are also in Room 6. They are not able to read the museum label for the object, and in any case it only includes a little basic information. But that is not what matters here: they all want to see the original of a painting that has long since been familiar to them from photographs, posters and souvenirs. There is one simple reason why they have nevertheless come to stand in front of the picture: it is because only this *Mona Lisa* is from da Vinci's own hand. This is the basis for its authenticity, understood here as meaning *certified origin*, vouched for (authorized) by the artist's signature, or at least attributable to the work beyond any doubt. This authenticity is the decisive criterion for the value of the painting, and this original can only be seen here in the Louvre (cf. Newman/Bloom 2011).

Historical approach: display value and originality as core values of the work

Uniqueness and originality were not always the most important criteria for the value of art. The ascent of the original to become the central fetish of the art museum took place during the eighteenth century (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 142), and this history is also reflected in a characteristic episode in the Louvre. In 1797, the museum's board of directors hired the art dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun as *commissaire expert*; four years earlier, he had demonstrated that the museum's catalogue contained numerous errors of attribution. As *commissaire expert*, Lebrun was authorized by the Minister or the museum to advise the members of the Louvre's *Conseil*. He was employed by the museum because he was able to place the works in broader work-historical contexts and attribute them to individual artists. The Louvre also needed him to provide commercial expertise in assigning value to works, with the required familiarity with market mechanisms. As an art dealer, Lebrun was thus in a position in which he was able to establish, within a museum, value criteria that were derived from the art market – precisely during a period in which Napoleonic raids were pouring countless art treasures from all over Europe into the museums of Paris (cf. Guichard 2011).

This unprecedented expansion in numbers of art works from all over Europe permanently changed the value standards used in the world of museum art. The material of the works and their aesthetic *valeurs*, as well as certified origination from the master's hand, became what determined artistic value. These criteria drawn from the art market represented a complete break with the primacy of education and instruction, which had been ‘faithful to the academic tradition of providing instruction based on casts and copies’ (ibid.: 97). Instead, works now came to be assessed in terms of their rarity, richness of detail and material quality.

It was during this period that the original rose to prominence in museum discourse – and a new figure appeared on the museum stage along with it: the *connoisseur*.⁵ As connoisseurship evolved into art, the question of authenticity became an essential factor in determining the value of works of art ...’ (Bazin 1967: 116). The connoisseur was familiar with the material through his constant dealing with it, not merely because he was familiar with formal characteristics and iconographic traditions – like the artists in the old *Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* under the *ancien régime* – but also because as a dealer he travelled widely and knew and was able to compare collection contexts, local art traditions and holdings of works at home and abroad. This type of connoisseur was able to penetrate deeply into the biography of the works and the contexts in which they were created, and was familiar with the peculiarities of the materials used and local painting traditions. This knowledge enabled him to attribute works to specific artists and epochs and to certify them as originals and thus authenticate them. The importance of attribution followed the interests of the art market and was a new phenomenon in museums (Guichard 2011; Pomian 1990).⁶ It was the correct attribution of a painting as an original that from now on began to determine whether it was museum-worthy.

There is no direct line that leads from the reevaluation of the original in the Louvre around 1800 to the present day. Even after Lebrun’s comparatively brief intermezzo in the Louvre (1797–1802), many art museums were still establishing large collections of copies and casts, particularly for educational purposes. In the German Empire, it was only during the museum reform movement in the years following 1870 that this was substantially questioned (cf. Joachimides 2001; Sheehan 2000). However, the Lebrun episode signalled a long-term change of attitudes in which authenticity – i.e., certified attribution to a named and known artist – became the central criterion for quality in art (Sheehan 2000: 91–2). The foundation for this change in the history of ideas lay in the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (cf. Rosen 1989), and it followed economic interests.

The logic of the original is directed against the copy and it aims at exclusivity. Up to the seventeenth century, it was a customary practice for artists such as Rubens or Raphael also to sign works painted by employees according to their specifications. This patronage system only became unacceptable when a European art trade developed in which art works were treated as commodities whose value was determined by supply and demand. The fewer the number of pieces by a known master that were on the market, the higher their price was (cf. Häselser 2002: 642–3, Newman/Bloom 2011). The great Venetian masters of the seventeenth century produced their own works solely as commissioned pieces. It was only works by their employees or copies that passed onto the open market. Only the master’s hand could guarantee the individuality, the craftsmanship and the inspiration of a genius – in short, the exclusivity – that vouched for quality. This close relationship between the work and an inimitable individuality (of the fine artist or literary author) made the ‘author’ into the central figure and led to the establishment of property rights in intellectual products. With the birth of the author, a distinct conception of the work arose during the eighteenth century that placed value on the unity and boundaries of a work in order to be able to clearly define authorship and authorial rights (Häselser 2002: 642–3; Pomian 1990: 111).

Although the concept of the work was central for the nineteenth-century museum, it was severely affected by the academicization of art history. The art-historical exhibition practices that Christian von Mechel established in the Belvedere in Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century used works as evidence of sequential art-historical epochs and turned them into specimens (see below; cf. Pommier 2006; Meijers 1995). Several art museums copied this principle during the nineteenth century. Aiming for encyclopaedic completeness, they used plaster casts of sculptures and other replicas as specimen copies and mingled these with originals. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that increasing criticism was raised at this primarily educational method of exhibiting, in which it was less important to show only genuine works from a master’s own hand than to instruct visitors in the best possible way about the development of art through the centuries (Klonk 2009; Sheehan 2002; Joachimides 2001). During the German Empire, an alternative to this practice was developed by Wilhelm von Bode, who implemented an ‘aesthetic culture’, as it was called at the time, while he was Director of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin in 1904. This approach no longer situated works of art in rooms representing historical epochs, but instead isolated the individual work

in order to emphasize its intrinsic value as an autonomous work of art. Bode only showed masterpieces, which had to be originals. It was no accident that he had all the plaster casts removed from the museum collections and transferred to the university between 1911 and 1913 (Joachimides 2001: 93–97).

Along with the esteem for the original masterpiece that became accepted throughout Europe during the nineteenth century, exhibition practices very gradually changed. Even in the 1870s, the Impressionists in Paris had experimented with exhibition forms that presented their paintings in isolation and with good lighting in front of neutral backgrounds. But the public did not appreciate this presentation of the paintings, deprived of any context, as they were looking for art that was suitable for decorating their living-rooms. Exhibition practices were still dominated by the style of hanging customary in the salon, with dense throngs of paintings on the wall, and by the residential room compositions used in the arts and crafts. Around 1900, the Secession exhibitions shaped the style for a new, sober aesthetics of art presentation: in Vienna, Koloman Moser introduced the undecorated, white exhibition space in 1903. The walls were now no longer covered with red velvet, but were white with no projecting decorative elements, and the paintings were hung at a sufficient distance from each other in a single row at the level of the viewer's eye (Joachimides 2001; Grasskamp 2003; Klonk 2009). Brian O'Doherty later coined the term 'white cube' for this and described it as the 'ideal gallery', one that keeps away from the work of art everything that might disturb its appearance. The space is so dominant that it raises everything it displays to a timeless value in its own right (O'Doherty 1999; cf. Duncan/Wallach 1980).

Whereas the nineteenth century conceived of the work as a closed structure that was at the disposal of the author alone and depended solely on the creative genius, the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century (particularly the Futurists) rebelled against this doctrine (Goldberg 2011). The new art forms of photography and film above all – but architecture as well – were no longer reflected in an aesthetic of the work that declared reproductions to be of inferior value *per se*. Walter Benjamin's famous 1936 essay on the work of art provided a theoretical foundation for this shift (Benjamin 1973). Benjamin's essay not only overcame the contradiction between the original and the copy, raising photography to the status of art; in addition, his theory signalled the decline of the canon. Even since the start of the twentieth century, the avant-garde had no longer been seeking to expand the existing canon and achieve acceptance into it, but rather to question it fundamentally and carry out constant innovations that would overcome what was old (Grasskamp 1981). Using montage and collage procedures, *objets trouvés* and ready-mades, artists such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp around 1900, and later Pop Art artists, freed themselves from the concept of the work as an organic whole. Performance Art (Goldberg 2011), Umberto Eco's theory of the 'open work of art' (1989), and reception aesthetics (Iser 1978; Jauss 1982), along with Michel Foucault's (1977) and Roland Barthes's (1977) farewells to authorship, finally dissolved the traditional view of the work.

The meaning of 'work' in the museum context

As the above brief (and necessarily extremely sketchy) excursion into the history of the concept of the work and the practices used to present it shows, works are intended to create aesthetic pleasure and unique experience. According to an orthodox view that developed during the nineteenth century, the value of works lies in their aesthetic quality, which is intimately linked with the person of the artist, even though this close link was loosened during the twentieth century. Despite shifts in the importance of originality within the concept of work over time, it still plays a central role in works, as it vouches for the artist's expertise, on the one hand, which only becomes clear in authentic – i.e., *certified*⁷ – originals. In visitor studies, Newman and Bloom (2011: 1) identified 'two key dimensions that are particularly important to the valuation of original artworks [today, tt]: the assessment of the art object as a unique creative act (performance) and the degree of physical contact with the original artist (contagion).' The artistic quality is supposed to determine the aesthetic effect, making a painting appear lively and brilliant instead of shallow and embarrassing. Secondly, originality guarantees an initial act of creative production of something completely new, such as is only possible for a genius.

However, these value standards are measured not solely using quality criteria that are immanent to the work. They follow the basic rules of the art market, in which scarce goods (which the originals by virtue of their uniqueness certainly are) fetch higher prices than mass-produced goods (Newman/Bloom 2011; Pomian 1990).

The work, however – and this is the core issue for the museum – requires originality because it is intended to trigger unique aesthetic experiences that are supposed to be linked to the originator and to the original medium and cannot be reproduced in any other form (Figal 2010; Dutton 2009). In contrast to all other types of museum object, it is only works of fine art that are intended for visual reception. It is the implementation of such reception – i.e., being looked at – that is the purpose of their existence. All of the original visual aspects of the work therefore seem to be essential, as they can influence its reception. Nelson Goodman described this as ‘autographic art’: in autographic art works, the recipient is not able to distinguish between constitutive – i.e., essential – and contingent – i.e. inessential – signs that make up the work as a whole. Only the historically certified authenticity of an original from the artist’s hand can guarantee that all of the aspects that *can* be essential for the aesthetic effect are actually present (Goodman 1976: 99–123). Autographic art works feature a sensory excess that is not controllable (and is also incapable of being copied) – and this is precisely its meaning as a stimulant of the imagination and the emotions. This effect can scarcely be grasped analytically, although – as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out – aesthetic experience does not overcome the viewer without any preconditions and it is always historically and culturally coded (Bourdieu 1996).

From this point of view, the exclusive aesthetic experience that works of art promise is an experience that is learned. And it probably has not only an aesthetic and historical basis, but is equally a social phenomenon: it is only from the knowledge that something is regarded as being special that the recipient also actually perceives it as special and in the process unconsciously reproduces a series of positions set out by the ‘artworld’: ‘To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld’ (Danto 1964: 580; cf. Newman/Bloom 2011).

The emphasis of social and context-dependent experiential qualities over aesthetics may be important for the sociological analysis of the effect of art. But it is secondary for the concept of the work that we are concerned with here. The decisive aspect here is rather that works of fine art, in the orthodox reading, were regarded for a long period (and still often are) as ‘phenomenal objects’ (Figal 2010) that promise exclusive experiences, and that this view led to conventions of display that continue down to the present day, even when one no longer necessarily shares the basic assumptions involved: The isolation of the objects in order to give the unique item better effect, dispensing with (visual) context information in order not to distract from the work’s unique atmosphere, the exclusive aura of the white cube that ennobles everything placed within it. These modes of display, which are linked to the physical presence of a specific exhibit, distinguish the work from the specimen.

Specimen

In the Linnaean nomenclature, *Buceros bicornis* is a great hornbill from south-east Asia. In the so-called ‘visible storage’ area for natural history in the Übersee-Museum in Bremen, it is found in a series along with other hornbills (*Bucerotidae*). The great hornbill stands in the upper left corner of a large glass showcase that fills the room. It forms the start of a biological taxonomy that is presented spatially, the aim of which is to show modern species as descendants of primitive, phylogenetically older species. In the Übersee-Museum, *Buceros bicornis* has an established place in the Linnaean encaptic classification system, which distinguishes objects hierarchically in a binary structure of categories using morphological characteristics. *Buceros bicornis* is a species in the genus of *Buceros* in the family of *Bucerotidae*, which along with the family of hoopoes belongs to the class of birds (*Aves*). The morphological features that give *Buceros bicornis* its place in the system include the shape of its beak and the structure of its plumage. The museum always exhibits only one representative of each species. Only the most essential information is provided for each object: its Latin name (*Buceros bicornis*), the year in which the species was first scientifically recorded (1758), and the region in which it occurs

(south-west India, Himalayas, Malaysia, etc.). It is not difficult to see that *Buceros bicornis* as an exhibit follows a different logic from the Mona Lisa in the Louvre: it is not uniqueness that is its outstanding feature, but rather its representativeness. It appears in the exhibition not as a unique example, but rather as a prototype; it is not a work, but a *specimen*.

Historical approach: systematics and representativeness as core values of the specimen

Work and specimen were not always subject to separate display strategies and standards of value. Before the rationalism of the Enlightenment transformed the world and the sciences diverged into different disciplines, works of art, historical objects, and objects from the field of natural history all shared the same exhibition spaces. The cabinets of art and curiosities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which were decisively promoted by humanism with its interest in the past and its relics, made no distinction between types of object and instead combined a whole miscellany of things into a marvellous *theatrum naturae et artis* (as Leibniz termed it) or a *theatrum sapientiae*, a theatre of wisdom, in order to present the world in microcosm. It was only when Francis Bacon with his empiricism and René Descartes with his mathematical conception of nature began to conceive of objects as sources of experimental discovery that *artificialia* and *naturalia* became difficult to combine in a single referential system (cf. Impey and MacGregor 1985; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bredekamp 1993; Grote 1994; MacGregor 2007).

In the age of the Enlightenment, the cosmological conceptual system on which the cabinets of arts and curiosities had been based collapsed. The influx of artifacts into Europe from all over the world required new principles of arrangement. Instead of facing problems whose origin lay in apparent superstition, naturalists were now aiming to obtain useful knowledge. The aim of collecting was no longer to represent the *macrocosmos in microcosmo*, the great world in miniature. Instead, the enlightened, rational collector distinguished art from plants, coins from instruments, and weapons from sculptures (Grote 1994; MacGregor 2007). The search for the laws of nature required average and normal phenomena, and unusual, isolated cases became less important (Bennett 1995: 41). Specialized collections were intended to make objects comparable, and a reduction in variety was intended to provide better insight into what was essential.

Michel Foucault described this as representing a transition from the 'age of the theatre' to the 'age of the catalogue' and provided a clear example of the process in the collections of Ulysse Aldrovandi and the *theatre of nature* that he established in Bologna around 1570. Aldrovandi was still collecting all sorts of information about his objects – along with the anatomy, procreation and habitat of the stuffed animals, also noting methods of capturing them, their allegorical uses, legends about them, and the 'best ways of cooking [their] flesh' (Foucault 1970: 129). By contrast, the naturalist Jan Jonston in his *Natural History of Quadrupeds* in 1657 only needed twelve characteristics, almost all of which were visible and could be observed, to characterize and classify his objects. Whereas for Aldrovandi, a plethora of objects and information was intended to reflect the richness of the world, Jonston radically minimized objects and information. 'The essential difference lies in what is *missing* in Jonston' (ibid.). The reduction in information meant that nature was arranged using only a few characteristics, making it possible to establish new relationships. As these were morphological characteristics, the observing gaze was the decisive analytical operation: 'To observe, then, is to be content with seeing – with seeing a few things systematically' (ibid.: 134). In other words, every detail of an object is no longer of equal importance because it leads directly to God; instead, the researcher concentrates on the differential characteristic (such as the shape of the beak or the structure of the plumage) that distinguishes one species from another. The specimen has been born.

A conceptual system based on the use of specimens emerged with Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* in 1735. Linnaeus arranged organisms in an encaptic binary system following clearly defined morphological characteristics in which lower-level groups are incorporated into the group at the next level up (*Buceros bicornis* is a species in the genus *Buceros* in the family of *Bucerotidae*). In this system, the individual object was no longer relevant as an individual, but was arranged into series of similar objects. It was consequently museums of natural history that

established *seriality* as a principle of museum presentation and thus (re-)translated Linnaeus's basic idea into a spatial diagram (Linnaeus himself generated his taxonomies from spatial arrangements of specimens in cabinets). In the natural history museums of Vienna or Berlin, the arrangements of the exhibition collections from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, placing objects of the same species and genus in glass cases, can still be seen today. These arrangements were the public face of the research collections and reproduced their taxonomic logic (Jahn 1979/80; Köstring 2003, Kretschmann 2006).

However, the origin of the specimen did not lie in natural-history collections alone. Art museums also began to arrange their exhibitions in accordance with new scientific and scholarly principles – and the central principle for the nineteenth century, with its faith in history, was that of chronology. This replaced the older principle of 'curiosity' derived from the cabinets of arts and curiosities, which linked objects associatively and conceived of the museum as a poetically organized *theatre*, rather than as a classifying *catalogue* (cf. Bann 2003). Between 1779 and 1781, a copperplate engraver named Christian von Mechel arranged the Imperial and Royal Art Gallery in the Belvedere summer palace in Vienna. He framed and labelled the paintings consistently, catalogued the art works and followed the exhibition principle of the *galleria progressiva* – i.e., presenting a chronological series of paintings in a linear sequence instead of hanging the walls densely as picturesque compositions, as had previously been the practice. Mechel arranged his paintings according to schools of art and subordinated the individual aesthetic effect of the single work to its place in the series (Pommier 2006; te Heesen 2012).

Mechel's approach was a provocative one, as it was no longer presenting art for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment (as a 'feast for the eyes'), but rather with a rationalistic claim to be introducing a system of arrangement that was equally applicable to both art history and natural history. Mechel's arrangement in the Belvedere in Vienna heralded a new epoch: instead of the associative assembly of disparate objects preferred in the poetically composed cabinets of arts and curiosities, the new museums subordinated their objects to a consistent system that followed scientific arrangements and explained itself to the viewer without a personal intermediary. The series and classification system gave the objects a scholarly frame of reference, no longer presenting a juxtaposition of disparate elements, but rather grouping similar objects together (cf. Meijers 1995).

In the nineteenth century, during which art history was emerging as a separate academic discipline, more and more museums began to follow this principle of presenting an art-historical encyclopedia. They established large collections of plaster casts and copies in order to close the gaps in their collections. Whereas copies were scarcely acceptable in the case of paintings, as the quality of reproduction was too poor, the plaster cast procedure for sculptures and busts was traditional, particularly since the reproduction technique in this case allowed precise mechanical imitation. From the planning of the collection of casts in the *Neues Museum* in Berlin starting in 1841 to the establishment of the *Musée des Sculptures Comparées* in the Trocadéro in Paris in 1882, these museums of reproduction enjoyed an unprecedented boom. (Joachimides 2001: 30).

It was only when the flood of objects in the depositories began to make the ideal of a complete, textbook-like presentation of the entire history of art appear utopian, and the museum reformers at the end of the nineteenth century began to demand quality instead of quantity and fresh principles for hanging (Lichtwark 1991; Joachimides 2001), that the period of the great collections of copies ended. Art again became a work, rather than a specimen.

The meaning of specimen in the museum context

In contrast to the work, which expresses the individuality of its creator and is therefore regarded as inimitable in every detail, the specimen is reduced to only a few characteristic features that place it in a specific species, family, or class. The decisive element is not the individual object, but the relationship *between* objects. Together, they can create knowledge that transcends what is feasible for an individual piece. Specimens are placeholders in a scientific system, representing examples typical of a specific species, technique, or material. Their value consists precisely in this representativeness (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 390–2). In 1918, Benjamin Gilman summed up this distinction in the memorable formula,

We call an object a specimen when we think of certain qualities in which it resembles other things. We call it on the other hand a unicum when we think of qualities in which it differs from any other thing. (Gilman 2008: 130).

Originality is of secondary importance in specimens, provided that a copy can display all the relevant characteristics in the same quality. In contrast to the work, the specimen functions as an information medium, as a vehicle for information. Once the latter has been obtained, the vehicle (i.e., the original object) becomes dispensable, as the scientist or scholar can note or repeat the findings he has gained from the specimen. This is the transition from the *trace*, which can only be read in the original object and is linked to it, to *data*, which can be stored, reproduced in a different form, compared with other data and processed into *facts* (as in a report or graphic diagram, for example) (Rheinberger 2011). Bruno Latour has succinctly and plausibly described this process of information processing and information transformation as a system of 'circulating reference' (Latour 1999).

However, it is not the case that originality plays no role at all in the specimen. Specimens are artificial categories that are derived from the system to which they are subordinated. Even in a specimen in a natural-history museum, originality is important, because each specimen shows slight differences that illustrate the variety of species and variety within a species (Kneil 2004: 25–32).

It is scarcely possible to reproduce this, as it first needs to be recognized and recorded; secondly, it is sometimes only discoverable using methods developed later (as in genetic analyses, which are based not on visible morphological differences but on the original organic material); thirdly, reproductions always eliminate information that appears irrelevant from the current point of view but may become important when different questions are addressed to the objects or new analytical procedures become important. This conception of originality is not a matter of aesthetic effect, however, but an epistemological concept. It is derived from a scientific interest in cognition and not from psychological effects such as those suggested by the terms 'aura' and 'authenticity'. This functional relationship to the materiality of the objects distinguishes the specimen not only from the work, but also from the *witness*.

Witness

In the *Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Museum of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany) in Bonn, there is a black Mercedes-Benz 300. In the 1950s, the limousine was one of the young Federal Republic's first status symbols. The *Haus der Geschichte* presents it in front of a large photo that shows the vehicle as a state limousine in actual use and supplements it with film clips that tell the story of the car and its former owner. The car was an elegant vehicle with a tall radiator grille, sweeping wings, and projecting headlight eyes, which had become slightly obsolete. The aesthetic appeal of the bodywork is admittedly not the reason why several visitors to the Museum of History pause beside the vehicle for a long time, attentively reading the texts and looking at the pictures surrounding it. The Mercedes 300 is equally far from being important as a typical representative of the cars of its time. The reason why this Mercedes 300 interests visitors to the Museum of History is its well-known owner: Konrad Adenauer. Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic, had this Mercedes delivered to him at the Chancellor's Office in 1951, and he used it as an official conveyance. The standards with the federal flags on the vehicle's wings still indicate this. The Mercedes 300, popularly known as 'the Adenauer', is on display in Bonn not as a specimen of early 1950s cars, or as a work illustrating the car-making achievements of the period, but as a *witness*.⁸ It is a memento, and the effect created by its presence lies in the aura of its former owner.

Historical approach: source value and 'affective value' as core values of the witness

As Otto Lauffer, a museum director in Frankfurt, already pointed out in 1907, it was not the exemplary usage value that was of interest in mementos,

but rather a very specific purpose that they only served on a single occasion at a historically important moment. It is the memory of a significant historical event or of outstanding historical personalities associated with it – not in an externally visible way, but attested to through oral tradition or written documentation – that gives it its value (Lauffer 1907: 13).

This 'affective value' (as Lauffer termed it) is associated with the object because it represents a thread from the mantle of history.

The Humanists – who established large collections of antiquities as illustrative material testifying to ancient grandeur and assisting in the understanding of ancient texts – already appreciated the object in its capacity as a witness (cf. Pomian 1994; Burke 1998). The best-loved antiquities were the masterpieces of classical art – the busts, sculptures and frescoes that served as models for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition to these, the scholars of those years also surrounded themselves with everyday objects with no special artistic value – medals and coins, fragments of stone, or buckles – to enable them to approach as closely as possible to the ancient world which they so much venerated. These material relics suggested a truth and truthfulness that were lacking in the ancient texts, whose credibility scholars had already substantially questioned. The antiquities were to serve as a window into the past and help the Humanists to empathize with the distant epoch as much as possible (Pomian 1990: 84).

The object as witness was also the focus during the French Revolution and the development of Europe's nation-states. During this period, when the rampages of the revolutionaries and armies were destroying thousands and thousands of pictures, statues, archives, books and monuments in order to sweep away every memory of the *ancien régime*, people in France began to reflect on the *patrimoine*, the nation's cultural legacy. This was regarded primarily as involving its important works of art. The category also included objects testifying to the greatness of the nation or important events during the Revolution. This was the emergence of an awareness of the commemorative value of objects and of the value of 'heritage' (*patrimoine, kulturelles Erbe*). This awareness soon spread to other countries in Europe, with national museums being established during this period in Stockholm (1792), Budapest (1802), Brussels (1803), Madrid (1815) and Prague (1818), as well as the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg (1852). They all had the task of sifting through the nation's material heritage, recording it and safeguarding it (Bazin 1967: 169–75; Poulot 2001: 50–76).

Nineteenth-century historicism carried this cult of preservation and commemoration to unprecedented lengths. Museums, archives and memorial sites to poets and other personalities sprang up everywhere. Museification of the objects for national and identity-establishing purposes was not always good for them, and the museum and its objects were among the targets when Friedrich Nietzsche attacked 'the stifling of life by the historical' and polemicized against 'the malady of history' in his essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' in 1874 (Nietzsche 1997: 121). This was linked with a rejection of what Nietzsche called 'antiquarian history', that 'knows only how to *preserve* life, not how to engender it' (ibid.: 75). In brief, Nietzsche regarded the nineteenth century's obsession with history as problematic, because it tended to inhibit and paralyse prospects for progress. And the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century – with the Futurists at their head – were soon to follow him in this general critique of the nineteenth century's cult of preservation.

This critique – which was expressed on many sides during this period (cf. Valéry 1960; Malraux 1967; Benjamin 1973; Lichtwark 1991) – put the museum and its works of art under pressure. The museum reformers (such as Alfred Lichtwark, Ludwig Justi, Hugo von Tschudi and Wilhelm von Bode in Germany) in particular turned the venerable institution of the museum upside down and tried to make it interesting to wider groups of visitors by explaining the objects (better) and in a less elitist way (Klonk 2009: 55–72; Joachimides 2001; Grasskamp 1981). The critique made hardly any impression on the status of the object as witness, however – and the two world wars also made no small contribution. During the First World War, museum-

based and private war collections sprang up throughout all of the countries involved in the hostilities, in order to document the truth about the events (cf. Brandt 1994). The industrial mass murder of the European Jews that began some twenty years later ultimately made the object as a witness into an imperative for the twentieth century's politics of memory, with the memorials in the former concentration camp buildings becoming the paradigmatic sites for this (Thiemeyer 2010; Williams 2007). The Nazis had carried out the murder of the detainees in their extermination camps in order to extinguish every trace of their existence. Faced with impending defeat, they tried to erase every trace of the monstrous crime – for decades encouraging the fantasies of those who wanted to deny that the Holocaust had ever taken place. The German memorial sites newly erected after the Second World War thus had a dual problem: on the one hand, they were to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and their suffering, although they held hardly any objects that would enable them to fulfil this commemorative task, since the Nazi annihilation machine had tried to eliminate all of the objective traces. On the other hand, they needed such objects not only as witnesses of human existence and suffering, but also as *evidence* that the Holocaust had taken place in such a way and not otherwise. The objects were the strongest arguments against the Holocaust deniers and had a quasi-judicial status as circumstantial evidence.

To enable objects to function correspondingly as witnesses, Holocaust memorial sites in Germany developed a specific documentary presentation style that used objects as *sources*. What is known as 'historical documentation', as seen today in the concentration camp memorial sites in Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen (and which influenced various historical museums in Germany, such as the Historical Museum in Frankfurt in 1972–1975 and the German–Russian Museum in Berlin in 1995; cf. Thiemeyer 2010), always shows exhibits in context and explains them with long text panels and supplementary documents (photos, reproductions of official letters, etc.). The objects stand for a historical *narrative*, which they relate or which is related through them. The presentations make a clear distinction here between original remains (usually the ruins of the old camp buildings) and documents introduced later. The original substance and the museum aids remain at a distance both visually and architecturally, to avoid reducing the effect of the 'authentic relics' (Knigge/Frei 2005; Faulenbach/Jelich 1994).

In this context, it is obvious that the originality of the relics is essential: only the originals vouch for the reality of a past event, its existence, because a material relic of it has remained. The key word in this context is *authenticity*; in the case of the object as witness, it refers to 'the quality of historical testimony, rather than the aesthetic value' (Korff 2007: 121–2). And it is this authenticity that establishes their added emotional effect.

In his 1936 essay on the work of art, Walter Benjamin calls this the 'aura', the source of which he sees as lying in the *hic et nunc* of objects handed down by tradition. 'The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity ... *The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technological ... reproducibility.*' (Benjamin 1973: 222).

'The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced ... what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.' (ibid.: 223).

For Benjamin, 'substantive duration' meant that the substance in front of one derived from another time, as a 'testimony to history', that only the originals as material relics can vouch for an ontological connection with the reality of a past event. The objects function as pieces of circumstantial evidence that have a history and which authenticate history. This is what Benjamin means by the 'authority of the object', which is jeopardized if an object is not original. Its history is not capable of being copied. It is linked to the original.

Benjamin's concept of the object as a guarantor that holds material authority – although introduced for works of art – becomes obvious in the face of the extermination camps of the 'Third Reich'. There is hardly anything that testifies more impressively to the scale of the millionfold extermination than the mountain of spectacles in the concentration camp memorial at Auschwitz. The index link to the past gives the museum object evidentiary value and distinguishes it, for example, from presentations of literary history (cf. Young 1988: 95–6). This is precisely the

point at which the museum has the advantage with the presence of its objects. They bear the traces with which a person has perpetuated himself in them, or which a past event has inscribed in them. Traces always indicate something that is absent. They are objective and arise through touch; they reveal themselves materially (Krämer 2007; cf. also Ginzburg 1989).

This function of presence is central for grasping the total effect of the object as a witness. The witness cannot be reduced to a piece of evidence or a document. Its emotional effect is not linked to the way in which it refers to victims or to the existence of a historical event. Adenauer's Mercedes does nothing of this sort. What it shares with the evidence of the Holocaust, however, is the ability to make objects visually present; it brings the past into the here and now (cf. Mersch 2002; Gumbrecht 2004). Adenauer's 'Adenauer' is marvelled at because it makes something of the person of the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic present. Only a vehicle which the Chancellor actually used is capable of doing this.

The meaning of witness in the museum context

The museum object as witness functions as *source* and/or as an *emotional object*. Sources – according to the standard definition used in Germany, by Paul Kirn – are 'all texts, objects or facts from which knowledge of the past can be gained' (Brandt 1996: 48). Objects as sources tell a story through their traces, help to make the past comprehensible, and can serve as evidence. Their traces provide information about historical situations and milieus, which one can reconstruct from evidence in the material. These traces represent the start of an interpretation and are not its result. However, they often only become comprehensible if they also provide additional information pointing to the traces and clarifying them. Precisely this is the goal of contextualizing presentation: it is only through the information about Chancellor Adenauer as the owner, the flags on the car's wings and the supplementary pictorial and audio documents that the object is recognized as being of importance and is perceived as being a significant historical relic.

However, creating or confirming knowledge is only one effect of the witness, which can in addition also touch the viewer emotionally. Stephen Greenblatt has described this dual potency using the formula 'resonance and wonder'. 'Resonance' marks the object as a representative of a distant culture or time, as a trace in foreign lands or in the past, into which it draws visitors and offers them new discoveries. 'Wonder' refers to the recipient's astonishment and is related to the emotional effect of an object (Greenblatt 2004). Museum objects as witnesses are surrounded by an aura that arises from an awareness of their involvement in a historically important event or connection with a historical situation, or that results from a link to an important person. This effect – which Otto Lauffer described as the 'affective value' – arises above all when it is confirmed (or at least not disproved) that an object was part of the *event* or was in direct contact with the *person*. The Ducal Crypt in Weimar lost one of its main attractions in 2010 when DNA analysis showed that none of the bones that have been preserved there for over 200 years in the coffin of the poet Friedrich Schiller actually belonged to him. The objects thus became valueless as witnesses, both epistemically (in relation to their source) and also emotionally (in terms of 'affective value') – and Schiller's sarcophagus has since remained empty.

Work, specimen, and witness as results of curatorial practice

I have attempted here, using example cases and theories from various specialist contexts and museum genres, to show that the three types of object – work, specimen and witness – are fundamentally different. Four points appear to me to be central here: the objects differ firstly in the aspect of reference – i.e., what they refer to. Secondly, they vary in their function – i.e., in what one expects of them and what they are intended to clarify: how the visitor is intended to perceive them. This leads, thirdly, to the specific value that the museum (or a specialist discipline) ascribes to them, and fourthly to the way in which the museum typically or ideally presents work, specimen, or witness (which can vary widely and is being deliberately subverted increasingly often).

| | Work | Specimen | Witness |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Reference | Author, originator | Scientific systematics | History, story |
| Function | Aesthetic pleasure | Evidence for a point in the system | Source of the past, authentication |
| Value standard | Unique, authorized | Typical, exemplary | Ontological link to the past |
| Typical mode of display | Isolated | Serial, relational | Narrative |

Just as important as the differences between them, however, is the fact that their status as work, specimen and witness is not assigned to things in any quasi-natural sense, but is the *result of curatorial practice*. The Mona Lisa might equally constitute a specimen if it were to be exhibited as a representative of sixteenth-century Italian art; the great hornbill could serve as a witness if a curator were telling the story of its discovery, its individual biography and the scientific context of that period; Adenauer's Mercedes could be a work of art if its aesthetic beauty were to be emphasized by placing it on a pedestal in a white gallery room or under a glass cover. Although we are accustomed to exhibiting certain objects in a specific way – the painting as an art work in isolation and intensified or scientific objects as specimens in series – these exhibition practices follow conventions that obey the epistemic interests of specific disciplines and are conditioned by specific temporal circumstances (cf. Bennett 2005). The way in which objects appear to us above all follows the perceptual customs of a given time and the curatorial presentation practices to which the objects are subject. Today, more and more museums are breaking with these conventions in order to change the status of their objects. They present objects of daily life as if they were artworks and thus shift the objects' cultural value from objects of nostalgia to objects of prestige. They challenge their visitors' perceptions by placing objects in unexpected settings. Thus, these museums question the guiding ideas of the scientific context to which they belong as well as the expectations of their visitors. These curatorial interventions show that objects are not in themselves work, specimen, or witness; it is we who *make* them into these and in this way assign new meaning and new value to old objects.

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Notes

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- ² This perspective on museum objects with its trifold focus on conventions of display, modes of perception and value attribution differs from familiar object typologies in museum studies (cf. Stransky 1974; Pomian 1990; Pearce 1993; Korff 2004). It understands its three types of objects as relational categories that depend primarily on curatorial practice. In this approach it differs from similar typologies such as those presented by Deloche/Mairesse 2011.
- ³ On the relationship between originality as a concept referring to sources (and their critical inquiry) and authenticity as a concept referring to social context and meaning, cf. the debates among museologists, e.g., in Stránský 1985.
- ⁴ *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. 'original'.

- ⁵ This development was not without precedent. Even in the sixteenth century, there had been a trade in collectors' objects, with experts available to test whether the artworks and antiquities being offered were worth their price. Cf. the detailed account in Pomian 1990.
- ⁶ Pomian identifies a decisive caesura in the art market in Paris around 1750. Whereas art dealers had previously mixed originals and copies in their catalogues – works of undoubted attribution and those whose origins were unclear – the primary question that now had to be asked of a painting in order to determine one's assessment of it was who its author was (cf. Pomian 1990: 148).
- ⁷ The concept of authenticity in art here differs from the concept of authenticity in the cultural sciences, for which authenticity means above all historical testimony and factual accuracy.
- ⁸ Jean Gabus in France wrote an early contribution to the discussion of the potential of museum objects as witnesses (cf. Gabus 1975). In Germany, it has also been discussed by Gottfried Korff (summarized in Korff 2007), and by Zbynek Stránský in the context of international museology (cf. Stránský 1974).

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